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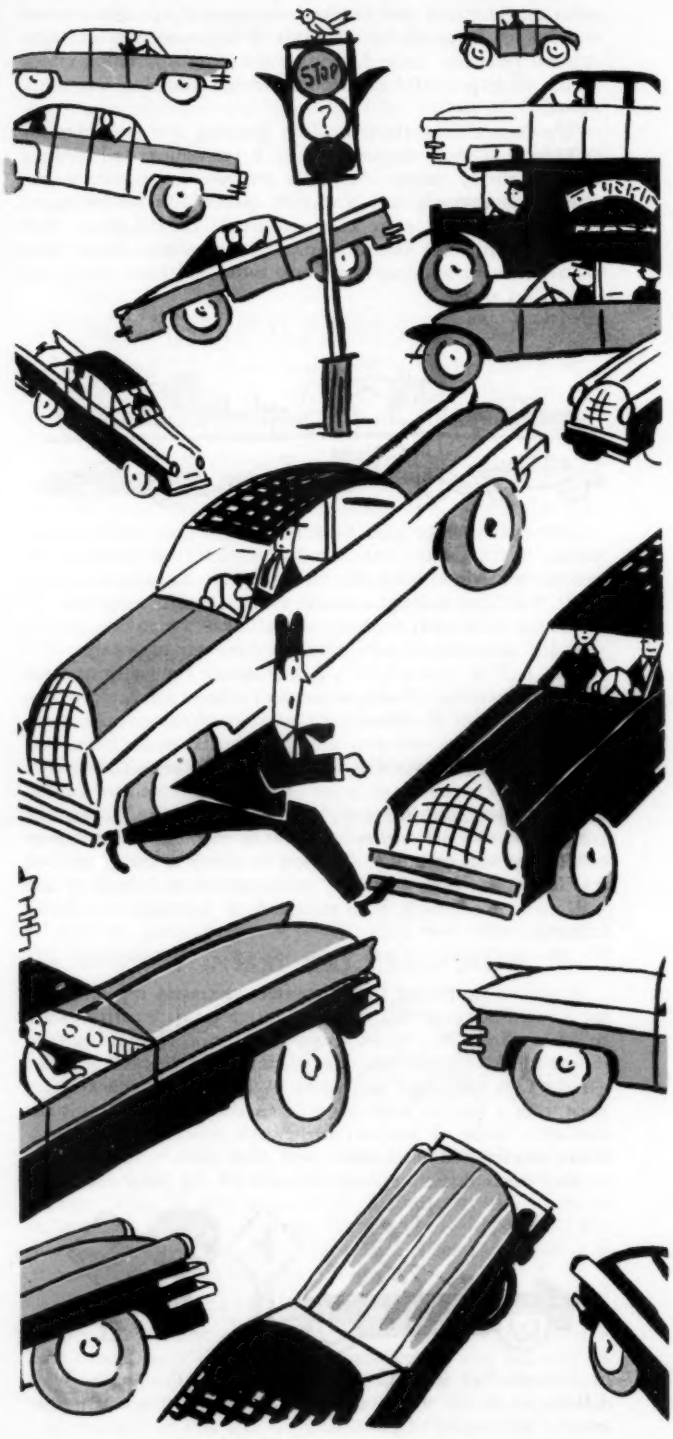


Drawings by C. P. Meier

# HIGHWAY SAFETY:

## Can We Learn To Save Lives?

In the past 50 years, the automobile has transformed our whole way of life — where and how we live, work, and play. Fifty years back the average American seldom traveled more than 200 miles a year beyond his neighborhood. Today Mr. and Mrs. America put an average of 10,000 miles a year on the family car and think nothing of it.

We own some 69 million passenger cars — over three-fourths of the world's total. We have 3 million miles of roadway, with better than 50 % of this in improved highway. Truly we are a nation on wheels.

All of this has cost us plenty in terms of dollars. But we have paid in terms of lives, too — a terrible and grisly price. Since 1900 over one million people have died as a result of highway accidents — more than all those killed in all American wars since 1775. In addition, at least 40 million people have been injured on our highways, and 12 million of these were permanently disabled.

But this isn't the worst of it. We are killing and maiming each other on our highways to a more horrifying extent than ever before. In 1955, there were 38,300 auto accident deaths; in 1956, there were 40,200. At this rate, it is expected that by 1966, 54,000 people will die from highway accidents each year and 1,865,000 will be injured.

These are alarming and sobering figures.

Are we in danger of accepting them as something we can't avoid?

Is it necessary for our highways to be plagued with violence, destruction, and death?

How does this carnage come about?

Who and what are the causes?

What can we do?

These are questions all of us should thoughtfully try to answer, and with full knowledge of the facts. We are face to face with one of the most disturbing vital issues of our time — highway safety.

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## FROM TIN LIZZIE TO HARD TOP

The first gasoline-powered automobile in the United States was built in 1892 by Charles E. and J. Frank Duryea. But in those early years it seemed that other forms of power were going to propel the "horseless carriage." In 1900, for example, there were 1,681 steam and 1,575 electric autos made in this country, while only 936 gasoline-engine cars were built.

It was soon clear, however, that the gasoline engine provided the cheapest and most efficient form of power. Ingenious young men with little money but with great hope, belief, and inventiveness began to put America on the road. Between 1900 and 1926 there were over 200 companies which manufactured automobiles commercially. Many of these companies failed, or combined with others to form bigger companies.

But out of their efforts there emerged a good automobile and a new system of manufacturing — the production line. This was first adopted on a large scale by Henry Ford in 1908. Production of the famous Model T soared from 10,000 in 1909 to a peak of 2 million in 1923. Soon other big companies, such as General Motors and Chrysler, also began to take a large share of the national market. In 1925 Americans owned 20 million cars. Distinctly the automobile age had come.

Except for the halt in production that came with World War II, this figure has climbed ever since. In the past ten years automobile registration has increased by 6 million. By 1975 we will have 100 million cars on the road.

Americans had hardly begun taking to the automobile when they found they had to do something to get the country out of the mud. At first cities and counties were responsible for road building. Then states began to take over most of the construction. In 1916 Congress passed the Federal Aid Road Act to help them with this job. Five years later it created the Federal Highway System. By 1954 we had an Interstate Highway System of 40,000 miles connecting forty-two state capitals and 182 out of the 231 cities with more than 50,000 population.

Added to this are our toll roads, such as the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Turnpikes and the New York State Thruway. Then in 1956 Congress approved an ambitious 13-year highway program under which the Federal government will give state authorities $33.8 billion for new construction. The program is aimed at the creation of a 41,000 mile system of national interstate and defense highways, plus the improvement of 700,000 miles of primary and secondary roads throughout the country.

The growth of the automobile industry and of our modern highway system has had a tremendous effect on almost every aspect of our lives. It's ended the isolation of the farm. It has enabled people to live far outside our cities in new suburban developments. It has made it possible for all of us to take pleasure trips on weekends and on vacations.

Economically, too, our cars and highways are important. Including those employed in the manufacture and assembly of parts, construction equipment, service, maintenance, insurance and other things required to keep our highway transportation going, about 10 million people owe their jobs to motor vehicles. Our cars and trucks have opened up new markets and created demands for all kinds of raw materials and agricultural products. Indeed, motor vehicle transportation is one of the most powerful factors behind our abundant economic growth.

We cannot do without it. It is growing and growing fast.

This is a most important fact to recognize in thinking about highway safety. Whether we like it or not, as our population expands and our cities spread out, we are going to have more and more cars and trucks on the road. And unless we run our motor transportation system better than we are now, it is going to become more and more costly and dangerous.

## THE GREAT AMERICAN TRAFFIC JAM

The toll in lives each year is not the only price we are paying for operating motor vehicles. In 1956, medical expenses, wage loss, insurance and property damage amounted to $6.5 billion, and in addition to this, traffic jams cost an estimated $5 billion, making a total of $11.5 billion in one year for destruction and inefficiency on our highways.

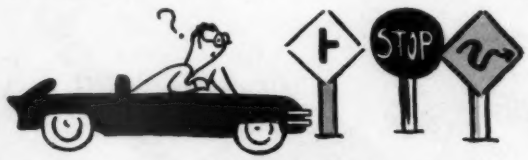
The fact is, our whole highway system is badly in need of an overhauling. That is what the Federal highway program is helping to do. However, no matter how fine our open highways may be, the driver is not going to be much better off unless our cities and towns, too, build wider streets and work out ways for a faster and more efficient movement of traffic.

But while more highways and wider streets will ease the congestion of traffic, they are not in themselves an answer to the problem of safety. The key to safety is the *control* of traffic — good laws and law enforcement, well-marked and well-maintained roads, high standards of licensing and driver education.

## WHAT ABOUT OUR TRAFFIC LAWS?

A serious stumbling block to effective traffic regulation in the United States is that our laws vary a good deal from state to state. In some states extending your arm horizontally means a left turn. In other states this signal serves for either a right or a left. And so it goes. What is legal in one state will bring a fine or suspension in another. Such inconsistencies are a cause of innumerable delays, irritations, fatal accidents, arrests, and convictions year after year.

And states differ not only in rules of the road and types of offenses but in road signs, markings and signals. They differ also in the way they conduct their courts, and in the amount and degree of penalties.




Action to introduce some sort of uniformity into our national hodge-podge of traffic laws goes back as far as 1925, when the National Conference on Street and Highway Safety appointed a committee to draft a Uniform Motor Vehicle Code. The Code has been kept up to date by the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances. Adoption of its principles has been widely recommended, and many states have followed important sections of it. A few have used it as a basis for recodifying all their motor vehicle laws.

But there still remains a great deal to be done. There are wide variances in speed restriction, right-of-way, turning and other rules. Until our state governments adopt a reasonably uniform code, these differences are going to be a hazard to motorists everywhere.

Although local conditions and customs may call for differing means of regulation here and there, almost all organizations which have studied the problem, including the President's Highway Safety Conference, endorse certain areas of uniformity as a minimum Among these are:

UNIFORM RULES OF THE ROAD (right-of-way, passing, turning, etc.)

UNIFORM SIGNALS, SIGNS AND MARKINGS (signaling for turns or stops; road signs; center lines or no passing lines)

UNIFORM STANDARDS OF LICENSING (eyesight, knowledge of traffic laws, road test)

PERIODIC INSPECTION (brakes, lights, tires, steering, etc.)

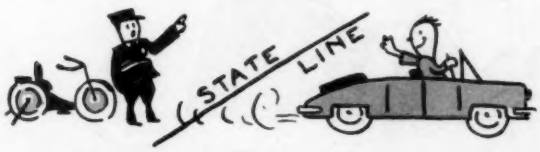
Yet however good or uniform traffic laws may be, they will serve little purpose unless they are firmly and fairly enforced.

State and local agencies, courts, and police need to cooperate in appraising the highway safety situation throughout all their jurisdictions and the facilities and methods at their disposal for good law enforcement. This means fair and impartial treatment of all offenders. The "cash register" justice of some communities whose officers deliberately prey on out-of-town motorists doesn't increase respect for the law. And it is questionable, too, if the mass production trials stemming from area-wide crackdowns really lead to the kind of justice we expect from our courts.

On the other hand, neither is better highway safety served when the courts and police are too lax or indifferent. The laws relating to the suspension or revocation of licenses need to be made clear to all drivers and applied the same way everywhere in the state.

One of the worst evils which has a way of cropping up is ticket fixing. To combat this, some states have adopted a uniform non-fixable traffic ticket. It would help highway safety if the same or similar tickets were used everywhere in the country.

Another practice that supports good law enforcement is the agreement between certain states to reciprocate on the




punishment of offenders. If a driver from State B is arrested in state A for an offense calling for the suspension of his license, state B will suspend it. Because of the increased amount of interstate driving, reciprocity is important. But it cannot go very far until state traffic codes have more uniformity in penalties for like offenses.

## TRAFFIC LAWS AND ACCIDENT PREVENTION

Good law enforcement means not only the apprehension and treatment of those who have broken the law, but also the establishment of conditions that will prevent violations. Since eight out of ten fatal accidents are caused by violations, law enforcement of this sort is the best means of accident prevention.

How are these conditions established? States which are working hard for good safety apply what is called selective enforcement. All arrests and accidents are carefully and fully reported to a central records agency. Statistical analysis provides the clue to where, when, and how accidents take place. Danger points on the highways can be better marked, policed or corrected, and places and periods of heavy traffic more strictly controlled.

Also, records analysis enables authorities to spot the chronically bad drivers and take action. Some states have adopted a "point system," under which an offender gets a certain number of demerits for each violation. When the demerits reach a given limit, the driver must appear for a hearing.

## TRAFFIC SAFETY AND DRIVER EDUCATION

A much more difficult question than where, when, and how accidents happen is why they happen.

Speeding is the primary cause of fatal accidents — either exceeding the speed limit or, equally as significant, driving too fast for road or weather conditions. But why do people speed? Some of the reasons are obvious. Twenty-one percent of fatal accidents occur on Saturdays, nineteen percent on Sundays. People take dangerous chances to get what they

think is the most out of their weekends. Other people speed either out of contempt or ignorance of the law or of the destructive power of the automobile. Some speed simply to get a bang out of it — often, that's just what happens.

A considerable percentage of speeders falls into the under twenty-five age group. An attack on this problem is being made throughout the country by programs of driver education in our schools. Over 8,500 schools now offer both classroom instruction and actual driving practice. Students who have taken such training have 40% to 60% fewer accidents than those who have had no formal driver education. Clearly highway safety would be improved if such courses were available, and perhaps required, for every high school student in the country.

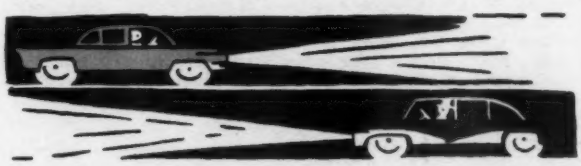
We can accomplish much through good safety education and law enforcement, but we still have a lot to learn about the root causes of why people drive dangerously. Some of our universities have set up traffic institutes which are working with state authorities on this problem.

Research indicates that good driving is a matter of making responsible judgments — that is, seeing a traffic situation and sizing it up realistically. But how a person thinks and acts on what he sees depends a good deal on his fundamental attitudes toward other people. An aggressive person will behave differently in a given situation than a timid one. The safest drivers seem to be people who are well adjusted to life — who have a sense of duty and a respect for the rights of others.

Continued research along these lines — the psychological characteristics of driving — may provide us with a more scientific basis for the treatment of offenders and for better programs of safety education.

## TRAFFIC SAFETY AND ENGINEERING

Research is also being conducted on how to design better highways, and some recent innovations are getting a wider try. To reduce headlight glare from opposing traffic on hills,



some major highways are being made with split-level lanes. Some are being built with their directions deliberately altered here and there to reduce the hypnotic effect of a straight roadway. Almost all our new highways have controlled access, either cloverleaf or some other design.

As important as the road itself is control over the flow of traffic. Research and experimentation on how to anticipate traffic volume and keep it moving safely by means of electrical signs and devices, better routing or improved traffic patrol will be increasingly important as our highways continue to become more crowded.

Another engineering problem to consider is how to design a safer automobile. But perhaps the problem should be put this way: — how to get Mr. and Mrs. America to buy safer automobiles? Popular stylistic features like the wrap-around windshield and the hard-top convertible, for example, have their safety drawbacks. Under certain conditions, the first creates a double vision and "ghost image" effect, and the second, with no center post support, provides little protection in a roll-over accident. But when the motoring public goes for features like these, that's what they're likely to get. If they expect and look for safety features, they'll get more of them.

Protruding door handles, window cranks, and the galaxy of knobs and dials on our dashboards are the causes of many accident deaths and injuries. Insert handles and cranks and a slow-rebound plastic dash pad would go a long way toward making our cars safer. Also a good many lives would be saved by the universal use of a seat belt.

A study made in Indiana in 1949 demonstrated that out of 600 accident deaths, proper safety design could have saved 504 lives.

Our automobile design engineers can certainly build an increasingly crash-proof car. Our state agencies, law enforcement authorities, highway and traffic engineers also know how to insure highway safety. The question is, will the public call for these things, and cooperate?

The vital issue before us is really one of education — finding ways to put our know-how to work for better highway safety.

The thousands of people killed or maimed on our highways each year are hostages to our apathy.

The catch is that we, or someone close to us, may be the next ones involved.

1. What can we do to arouse interest in traffic safety in our schools and communities? Do any of our civic organizations have safety education programs? Are they in touch with any national organizations?
2. Do we or do we not believe that strict traffic law enforcement may run the risk of endangering our civil rights?
3. How do we feel about reciprocal enforcement agreements between different states?
4. What about having the Federal Government police our national highways? Would this have any effect on states' rights?
5. Do we or do we not believe that the Uniform Motor Vehicle Code could and should apply to every state?

**WHERE TO GET FURTHER INFORMATION ON HIGHWAY SAFETY**

Some national organizations which provide information on highway safety are: National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, 1604 K Street, N.W., Washington 6, D.C.; Accident Prevention Department, Association of Casualty and Surety Companies, 60 John Street, New York 28, N.Y.; American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, 912 Barr Bldg, Washington 6, D.C.; American Automobile Association, 1712 G Street, N.W., Washington 6, D.C.; American Municipal Association, 1313 E. 60th Street, Chicago 37, Ill.; Automobile Manufacturers Association, New Center Bldg., Detroit 2, Mich.; Automotive Safety Foundation, 200 Ring Bldg., Washington 6, D.C.; International Association of Chiefs of Police, Traffic Division, 1704 Judson Avenue, Evanston, Ill.; National Association of Automotive Mutual Insurance Companies, 20 N. Wacker Drive, Chicago 6, Ill.; National Highway Users Conference, National Press Bldg., Washington 4, D.C.; National Safety Council, 425 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago 11, Ill.

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